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Gender, Globalization, and the Ciudad Juarez Femicide in Selenidad and Roberto Bolaño's 2666

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/ GENDER, GLOBALIZATION, AND THE CIUDAD JUAREZ FEMICIDE IN
SELENIDAD AND ROBERTO BOLAÑO'S 2666 /

by

Emily Lagg

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

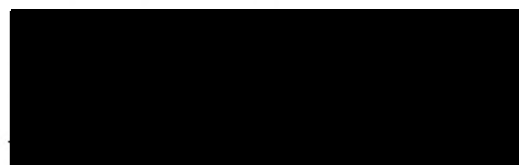
For the Degree of

Master of Arts

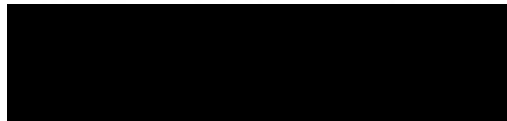
May 2014

College of Humanities and Social Sciences
English

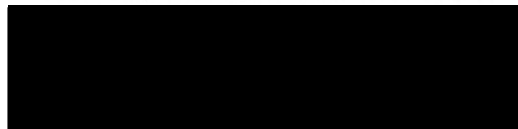
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Abstract

Published posthumously in 2004, Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño's *2666* portrays a vast range of perspectives and locations. Divided into five distinct parts, the book traces the interconnected specters of violence across the wild sprawl of the 20th century and its futures. The largest part of the novel, "The Part About the Crimes," represents a fictionalized account of the feminicide in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, in which hundred of women were killed over the span of years without substantive explanation or legal conclusion. The women, both in reality and in *2666*, are often workers at maquiladoras, giant industrial factories whose existence is predicated on a web of economic factors related to the global order of millennial late capitalism. Bolaño describes the bodies of these women as they are found, often mutilated and abandoned in the maquiladora's dumps (furthering the assertion that the women are the physical bi—products of multinational corporations), objectively describing the possessions found on the victim. These descriptions pile into the hundreds in Bolaño's book, defying narrative linearity, creating a sense of chaos. Just as the circumstances of the victims' life and death are varied, so too are the possible perpetrators. The descriptions Bolaño provides are not clues that lead us towards a single point: the reader instead begins to understand that the perpetrators of these ideas are larger than a single person or entity—it is a broader ideology that in essence *allows* these patterns of violence to keep repeating. This thesis is an examination of this ideology as Bolaño delineates it in his novel (that includes social, economic, and cultural factors), not only in the section about the feminicide, but also in the text as a much larger whole. My hypothesis is therefore that the feminicide in Ciudad Juárez is enabled by cultural attitudes that are propagated and sustained by exploitative

economics enabled by globalization.

Necessary to this conversation too is an examination of how the media and popular culture reify and disseminate narratives about these systems of objectification and violence. As the scope of *2666* makes clear, the crimes in Ciudad Juárez are not an isolated phenomenon of the ways ideology and its relationship to economics and gender manifest themselves. I explore this issue specifically by looking at the 1995 murder of the pop star Selena and the troubling symbiosis between her subsequent cultural deification and the emergence of Latinas as a corporate demographic in America. Both the text and her death assert clear cultural narratives about the gendered violence in a specifically Latina context. The cultural remembrance of the singer after her death, characterized by Deborah Paredez as “Selenidad” (in her book of the same name), serves as a problematic intersection of the articulation of this ideology in a specific Latina context. Selena’s visibility and cultural significance simultaneously serve as empowering representations and as problematic reifications of narratives of violence and death in conjunction with Latina bodies, giving us a clearer picture of the ways this ideology operates in evening seemingly inane contexts.

Though the section about the deaths in Ciudad Juárez (the section is aptly titled “The Part About the Crimes”) is the largest section of *2666*, the novel also touches on a circle of academics obsessed with a mysterious German writer, Mexican journalists and politicians, as well as World War II and the Holocaust. Each one of five sections is a different part of the same conversation about how globalized systems of power participate in the cycle of gendered exploitation the maquiladoras represent. This speaks urgently to the “so—what” of examining his text: what real—world implications can we

learn by studying the ways these economies and modes of cultural production function?

This is the true question at the heart of 2666. Its later discussion of the Holocaust too creates echoes we hear in Ciudad Juárez: how do dominant systems of cultural and economic power perpetrate death on such a horrific scale?

GENDER, GLOBALIZATION AND THE CIUDAD JUÁREZ FEMINICIDE IN
“SELENIDAD” AND ROBERTO BOLAÑO’S 2666

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May 2014

Acknowledgements

It is impossible for me to overstate my gratitude towards all of the people who have helped encourage, support, and humor me throughout my time at Montclair. I am indebted to my fellow GAs and everyone at the Center for Writing Excellence for being unending sources of encouragement, solidarity, and enthusiasm. My professors have all been inspirational sources of patience and intelligence. I would especially like to thank Laura Jones for signing on to help me with this project and being so gracious with her time, as well as Emily Cheng, without whom I would not have even thought to approach this subject. Most of all, I would like to thank Melinda Knight for being a phenomenal source of support, encouragement, and guidance, not only with this project, but all throughout my time at the CWE.

Many thanks to my brother, Samantha, and to Kelsey for keeping me sane despite the overwhelming odds. Also thank you to my parents, Richard and Dorothy, for everything.

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Introduction

Not a syllable was breathed. Nothing was heard but the low, steady, overruling hum of the iron animals. The human voice was ban-ished from the spot. Machinery—that vaunted slave of humanity—here stood menially served by human beings, who served mutely and cring-ingly as the slave serves the Sultan. The girls did not so much seem accessory wheels to the general machinery as mere cogs to the wheels. —Herman Melville, “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids.”

Roberto Bolaño’s reputation as a literary firebrand proliferated in the years leading up to his untimely demise in 2003 from liver disease. Myth surrounded his death and prolific output as the literary establishment made enthusiastic efforts to accommodate him at an accelerated rate that matched the posthumous publication and translation of the plethora of writing he completed towards the end of his life. The global, kaleidoscopic scope of his work dovetails with autobiographical vagaries: ties to revolutionary anti-Pinochet factions in Chile and fringe leftist poetry groups inextricably became linked to the man who himself almost certainly had a hand in their dissemination (Nyugen, Medina). Born in Chile in 1953, the poet-turned-novelist lived around the world, first in Mexico, later moving around Europe before settling in Spain, where he worked odd jobs, including stints as a dishwasher and garbage collector to support his poetry habit (Pope 159). As David Kurnick perceptively notes of these factors,

Some caution does seem warranted: when a writer earns comparisons to Coltrane, Cortázar, Proust, and the Sex Pistols, the encomia begin to sound less like measured judgment than the symptoms of incomprehension, or the fruit of an overactive PR assault. . . . The biography is certainly ripe for the distortions of myth. If you have looked at a book review section in the last decade you know something about Bolaño’s life and afterlife: the youthful avant-garde hell-raising

in Mexico City; the return to his native Chile and the stint in Pinochet's jails; the period with leftist guerrillas in El Salvador and the travels in North Africa; the possible heroine addiction; the clean-up, marriage, and bourgeoisification in Spain; the 1993 diagnosis of liver disease and the miraculously productive final years (fourteen books in a decade); the embrace by the Hispanophone literary establishment and the speedy welcome by Anglo-American readers; the endless flow of posthumous publications.

These biographical details give us some helpful context to ground a discussion of the writer's work, but more pressingly, they demonstrate the necessary conflation of biography with writerly voice: authors are cultural products just as much as their texts are. I say this not because the biography of Bolaño has a place in this thesis, but instead because of the way it explicates the fact that ideology is reinforced to us through these kinds of understandings in the first place. As Foucault famously asserts in "What is an Author", the function of the writer is always necessarily borne from the contextual social factors that precede his or her ontological possibility: "The proper name and the name of an author oscillate between poles of description and designation, and, granting that they are linked to what they name, they are not totally determined either by their descriptive or designative functions" (121).

This brings me to my second point: these autobiographical tidbits hint towards an orienting tool to illuminate some of the subject matter that Bolaño grapples with in all of his work, but, I would argue, most intensively in *2666*, the novel published after the writer's death in 2004, first in Spanish, then translated into English in 2009 (Echevarría 895). Divided into five distinct parts, the book traces the interconnected specters of

violence across the wild sprawl of the 20th century and its futures, focusing mainly on the mystery surrounding enigmatic European novelist Benno Van Archimboldi, as well as a series of violent, unexplained crimes against women in the fictional city of Santa Teresa (very clearly meant to be Ciudad Juárez) in Mexico. The global and temporal scope of the novel urges readers to view the violence it depicts in a larger ideological context. As Alexander Pope observes,

That the novel begins in Europe, but not in any one country, in an interconnected and fluid geography, places us in an overwhelmingly decentered space. Language does not seem to be an obstacle. While supposedly in this novel we should hear Spanish, English, French, German, and even Russian, there is nothing but Spanish, as if the final barrier (or Berlin/Babel Wall) had completely collapsed.
(160)

Bolaño in general and *2666* specifically is part of a new paradigm of global fiction that works through intensive realism to press, in the words of Jonathan Lethem, “a reset button on our deplorably sporadic appetite for international writing.” He accomplishes the effect of mapping how structures of power in globalized, late capitalism are not idiosyncratic problems individual cultures grapple with but instead part of a much broader, omnipotent systematic ideology.

So how does Bolaño perform this literary hybridity? If this is Bolaño’s project, then *2666* is his opus magnus. The book consists of five distinct parts that span time and location. First, “The Part About the Critics,” focuses on the intrigues of a group of close-knit friends of academics first drawn together through their fascination with enigmatic European novelist Archimboldi. Their follies function as a *Paradise of Bachelors* to the

text's later *Tartarus of Maids*, made visible in the horrors of the feminicide in Ciudad Juárez. Just as in Melville's story, what seems like a sophisticated, congenial celebration of camaraderie at first is later revealed to be wholly predicated upon the large scale exploitation of female factory workers that support a larger, globalized economy. The book's second section "The Part About Amalfitano," follows a Chilean philosophy professor who has recently been transported to Santa Teresa. This association becomes clear when Amalfitano begins to fear that his daughter Rosa will become a victim of a recent series of disturbing crimes against women in the city. The parallels to the feminicide in Ciudad Juárez here become unmistakable, and it is at this point that their dark current envelops the book. Part two marks the precipice, where, as Francine Prose points out, "Bolaño's terrifying and gorgeous vulture of a novel keeps landing in Santa Teresa."

If Bolaño's project is centrally concerned with mapping the reifications of global systems of power, control, and violence in modern culture, then Santa Teresa (functioning metonymically as Ciudad Juárez) makes an apt stage. Between 1993 and 2000 in Ciudad Juárez, between 200 and 400 young women were reported missing (Portillo). These crimes are all related in their violent nature, and also because only a few have been considered 'solved' (Portillo). The violence present in Ciudad Juárez is emblematic of a larger trend as well: between 1999 and 2005 in Mexico, according to estimates by women's rights groups, more than six thousand women and girls were victims of gender-based murder (Fregoso and Bejarano 6). The recurring and unsolved nature of this violence makes it clear that it is underwritten by a larger cultural ideology. As David Kurnick describes of the events "The Part About the Crimes" touches on,

The killings are both a literal dividend of neoliberalism's reorganization of the border economy and an emblem of a century's crimes. Here again, Bolaño gestures at a final understanding that never arrives—any narratable “solution” to these crimes would be obscene—but the novel is compulsively readable. Its prose, devoid of prurience even when recounting the most brutal events, generates a kind of ethical suspense that is not discharged when you close the book.

In this way, we can categorize these deaths as femicide, which can be understood, according to feminist scholars Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano as “gender-based violence that is both public and private, implicating both the state (directly or indirectly) and individual perpetrators (private or state actors); it thus encompasses systematic, widespread, and everyday interpersonal violence” (5).

Bolaño understands the global, ideological implications of the events of the femicide in Ciudad Juárez, and this is why the majority of my discussion of the text will be on the book's largest section, “The Part About the Crimes.” I am most interested in how Bolaño uses the heteroglossia uniquely available to the literary form of the novel to examine this phenomenon. But first a discussion of the larger ideology as we see it in our culture: I will work through foundational ideas, leaning on Michel Foucault, Fredric Jameson, Max Horkheimer, and Theodor Adorno, about the way culture operates and perpetuates this specific, gendered ideology, as well as how it is inherently tied to globalized economics and violence, and then talk specifically about how the death and subsequent cultural deification of the Chicana pop star Selena works to reify and keep these ideological narratives alive in a Latina context. This will lay the foundations for our conversation, as well as teach us that we see these things everywhere in culture: ideology

is an essential and inseparable part of how we understand ourselves. Popular culture is just as implicated in the violence 2666 depicts; it is inseparable from the economic logic it finds its impetus in. In this way, “Selenidad” speaks to Slavoj Žižek’s notion of the danger of larger, systemic violence, which includes, “not only direct physical violence, but also the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence” (9).

For the second half of this thesis, I will dissect “The Part About the Crimes,” arguing that Bolaño uses literature to show us how ideology shapes our culture. Of specific interest to me too is the connection between the violence against women and the *economic* implications. As Gayatri Spivak asserts in “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” “we need to realize that the economic is fundamental in ideology—it is not just a part that academics can conveniently explain themselves around, but by subverting it, you're doing a larger disservice” (70). A disturbing number of the women, both in Bolaño’s account as well as in reality, were young factory workers at later, US-owned, NAFTA sanctioned maquiladoras. The totality of these systems of control, oppression, and violence becomes clear through talking about these factors. As Sharae Deckard perceptively notes, 2666 exemplifies “the antinomy between world-market and world-mapping that runs throughout Bolaño’s work,” which strives towards:

...a totalizing intelligence in search of formal correlations between local social relations and global structures, capable of connecting seemingly incommensurable geographies and reconstituting exploitative relations between cores and peripheries, particularly the role US imperialism has played in shoring up fascist regimes and instituting asymmetrical economic relationships throughout

Latin America, from Chile to Mexico. (2)

Finally, I will conclude by looking about how the other revolving parts of Bolaño's novel contextualize the violence at its core through globalization's history and progress.

Through the connection to certain types of isolated academic discourse as vain, self-important, through its specific connection to World War II and the Holocaust specifically as key events in the creation of late capitalism's ideology, Bolaño gives us a worldview that is comprehensive in its density. "How did this happen?" We might ask about the feminicide in Ciudad Juárez. By pointing to the ideological and cultural specters that precipitated past instances of widespread violence, Bolaño is able to delineate these forces at their core. In this way, moving forward, Bolaño's *2666* might help give voice to the contradictory, complicated, problematic futures of globalized late capitalism, and the systems of violence inherent in its ideology. As Jonathan Lethem concludes, "In a time when our disciplines are increasingly under pressure, Bolaño also offers a unique teachable moment with an enormous critical potential not to be squandered."

Part 1

What Matter Who's Singing? : Reading "Selenidad" as Ideology

Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the Individual is only a flickering in the closed circuit of historical life. – Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method

This chapter will be an examination of how Roberto Bolano's 2666 speaks to modern, evolving truths about the systemic nature of gender, violence, and exploitation, specifically in the context of globalized economic capitalist order. But why bother with such an intensive conversation of such a subject? What usefulness is to be salvaged from a concentrated reading of a text like this? From an author like this? Certainly the role of literature is understood as being beyond a simple call to social change or action. As the humanities change, the role of literature is changing rapidly, permanently, and irrevocably. It is not exactly the change in value or worth that bears further examination, but instead the shape that it takes and carves out in our culture. In essence, how do we contextualize and place the understandings of our world that literature makes available to us? What part of the conversation does it compose besides an object of academic fetish or arbiter of class? In such a fractured, saturated, media-filled world, the kind of message sending traditionally ascribed to novels might seem quaint, anachronistic, and part of an inherently impossible project. To whom are you speaking? To what change are you calling? What conduits of progress, of progressivism, are allowed to us? It is my argument that 2666 finds its function not in the prompting of widespread social change, but instead in tracing the inculcating wholeness of power and the way that power

operates. Thinking through the global position from a Latin American vantage point is its strongest, most clearly articulated contribution.

The violence that *2666* depicts is visceral and horrific in its hyperrealistic depiction, and because of the way Bolaño keeps the reader from narrative cohesion, instead in a falling feeling of terror, the reader bears witness to the potential omnipotence of systems of late capitalism of cultural and economic power. It is my argument that books and their messages are useful insofar as they allow a unique kind of explication that is exactly in the ethos of the way we live; they have in the dialectical systems of narrative they foster, a larger function as essential explicating objects of our larger cultural ideology. Bolaño wholly succeeds in this project.

If this is true that Bolaño succeeds then, how (or maybe more pressingly, *why*) do we measure his success? I would argue that his strategies of (de)narrativization find legitimating forces in cultural patterns that can be traced similarly elsewhere. We see systemic, gendered violence in all places in our culture, and in the conflation of female bodies and violence in a larger capitalistic order of understanding (Spivak, Wright). It is in the way we valorize dead women everywhere. The old bourgeois distinctions between how culture communicates messages, meanings, ideology, is boorish and fascist. When everything, all knowledge is immediately, endlessly available, what might these distinctions even mean?

It makes sense then, if our culture is coding our media with messages of this 'punishment' for being female, we can turn to Michel Foucault for a more thorough discussion of the way power, punishment, and discipline function in our society. In his canonical *Discipline & Punish*, he discusses the long cultural tradition of penalizing

criminals (who can be more broadly understood as transgressors) by inflicting severe bodily punishment that serves as a legitimization/ visible mark of punishment for transgressions. As society has progressed however, he argues, a more subtle, subversive (and ultimately effective) system of punishment came into place through the form of discipline. If the subjugated feel that they are being watched all the time, then they internalize the punishment that was once inflicted on them externally. That is, they reinforce the reigning ideology through the form of discipline. He writes, "it is the certainty of being punished and not the horrifying spectacle of public punishment that must discourage crime." He continues,

In this way, power can be understood as not a thing that an institution or ruling sovereign contains, controls, or wields, but instead as cultural force that shapes the subjectivity of its participants. If they internalize the messages of control, what then? . . . a certain policy of the body; a certain way rendering men useful. This policy required the involvement of definite relations of knowledge in relations of power; it called for a technique of overlapping subjection and objectification; it brought with it new procedures of individualization. . . .

Knowable man (soul, individuality, consciousness, conduct, whatever it is called) is the object-effect of this analytical investment, of this domain observation. (305)

Bolaño's depiction of the feminicide in Juárez is exemplary of these paradoxes and the ways they weave themselves into cultural ideologies of gendered violence. The deaths of the women, far from being the acts of a removed, separate group of sociopaths, are instead predicated on cultural power relationships. It is a larger ideology that is accomplishing this, more than anything else. This is how the power is wielded. These are

the systems that 2666 makes clear to us. Foucault's conceptions of power are so accurate when it comes to the way culture operates because he understands that old distinctions of "good" and "bad" are just the ideological holes where morality is manipulated.

Susan Bordo famously uses this conception of understanding power in the context of women's bodies in *Unbearable Weight*, in which she traces a long history of discipline in regards to gender and women's bodies and Western conceptions of femininity as the negative space created by masculinity. She talks specifically about the repetitiveness and omnipotence of these phenotypes in all strata of culture, turning the conversation not coincidentally at the end of her book to Madonna, and the space of public fascination she occupies. She observes, "that we are surrounded by homogenizing and normalizing images – images whose content is far from arbitrary, but is instead suffused with the dominance of gendered, racial, class, and other cultural iconography – seems so obvious as to be almost embarrassing to be arguing here" (250).

Bordo's specific focus on Madonna is not accidental. The fact that these ideologies manifest themselves in popular culture is, to postmodern theorists, perhaps the defining trait of the cultural logic of late capitalism. As Fredric Jameson asserts, "commodity production and in particular our clothing, furniture, buildings, and other artifacts are now intimately tied in with styling changes which derive from artistic experimentation; our advertising, for example, is fed by postmodernism in all the arts and inconceivable without it" (124).

In this way, we can see that pop stars, far from being the irrelevant realm of some cultural detritus, are instead at the central ideological beating heart of the way culture reproduces and understands itself, and tells us stories about who we are. This brings me

to my point: Selena Quintanilla, is a uniquely Latin American pop star situated at the very cultural and ideological nexus of Bolaño's fictionalized Santa Teresa. She is at the core of the globalized order that *2666* works to portray, and more specifically, at the juncture of Latin American and feminine conceptions of how identity and bodies are abused by global world economic order, in which the US is *the* key player. Her murder by the president of her fan club in 1994 and subsequent cultural canonization functions as a necessary starting point for a discussion of the larger, interconnected problems of gendered violence that Bolaño's text speaks to.

It is also essential to specify that her biography then becomes secondary to the cultural afterlife she continues to have, and how the way she was valorized after her death is symptomatic of nearly all the dynamics discussed here—the violent, premature death, the arbiter of minority and majority ideas about sexuality, gender, and the body, and more importantly, the seemingly trivial and inane ways this ruling ideology is reinforced to us as a culture. Bolaño's book delineates these patterns in his text, but the cultural performance of Selena's memory is emblematic of the complicated, contradictory ways these dialectics manifest themselves in seemingly less innocuous ways in popular culture. Though the primary text in my project is Bolaño's *2666*, and how it treats the phenomenon of the feminicide in Ciudad Juárez, let us first look at the phenomenon of Selena, her death, and her remembrance as a very real iteration of the dialectical tension of these issues at the very core of cultural conceptions about gender, the female body, and violence at the borderlands of US/Mexico.

If we understand this as true, then the conversation can easily be transposed to Latin America, and more specifically, Latin American pop star Selena Quintanilla. Gloria

Anzaldua diagnoses the border between the United States and Mexico as embodying many of the contradictions and confusions that I would argue are microcosms of a larger condition of globalized, fractured, dialectical identity. Characterizing this hybridized female identity as *la mestiza*, she writes:

Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, *la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of the flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war. Like all people, we perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates. Like others having or living in more than one culture, we get multiple, often opposing messages. The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incomparable frames of reference causes *un choque*, a cultural collision. (78)

This specific *choque* is the place where I begin my argument. A preemptory note first though: to see something like this as a trifle, as a sensationalized tabloid phenomenon, is to miss the point entirely. Though the postmodern has proved itself unfashionable in its resistance to reading and meaning, what can be salvaged is its understanding that all parts of culture matter, all parts of culture whisper messages into our ears. To ignore these voices is to leave their dynamics unchallenged, to imagine ourselves somehow, impossibly, existing outside their inclusion, is impossible: *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*¹: indeed, there is nothing outside of the cultural production of meaning, of ideology. As Foucault observes, "in this central and centralized humanity, the effect and instrument of complex power relations, bodies and forces subjected by multiple mechanisms of

¹ Jacques Derrida's famous observation when discussing Rousseau in *Of Grammatology* "there is nothing outside the text" (151).

‘incarceration,’ objects for discourses that are in themselves elements for this strategy, we must hear the distant roar of battle” (308).

On March 31, 1995, twenty-three year old Tejana singer Selena Quintanilla was shot and killed by the president of her fan club, Yolanda Saldivar. News outlets quickly picked up the story as hundreds and eventually thousands of fans flocked to the site of her death in Corpus Christi, Texas. *People Weekly* responded to this public outpouring by publishing an issue with Selena’s image on the cover in seven states in the U.S. Southwest two weeks later on April 17, 1995. The cover stated, “Before her time: Touted as Latin music’s Madonna, the Texas-born singer known as Selena was on the brink of cross-over stardom – until a friend’s bullet cut short her life” (Hewitt, Harnes, Stewart, 49). The 422,000 copies of the issue ran out virtually overnight, and, prompted by this success, editors at *People* soon published a 76-page commemorative issue on the life of the singer (Jones 2). The issue, which marked the third time *People* had run a commemorative issue (the other two occasions being the deaths of Audrey Hepburn and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis), sold out its initial printing of 523,000 issues, as well as its second printing of 384,000 issues (Paredes 19). These statistics prompted the editors of the magazine to launch *People en Español* soon after. By the end of 1996, *Newsweek en Español* and *Latina* joined their ranks on newsstands around the country (Paredes 19).

But why enter into a discussion of the semiotics of *People Weekly*? Again, to reflexively dismiss the narrative of Selena’s death (and the social and economic factors that facilitated its commemoration in *People*) as a vapid phenomenon of tabloid culture is to miss the point entirely. This is instead wholly representative of the emergence of

several convergent, simultaneous phenomena: globalization, border identity, gender, and sexuality. Considered in this context, its implications become clear: the success of this issue of *People* works as a specific articulation of female Latin American identity in the larger context of American (and by proxy, globalized) culture writ large.

Through her death, Selena became emblematic of a growing demographic who, before her, could locate few relative points of identification in American popular culture. It is not coincidental either that this emergence of identity is parallel with emergence of Latinas/os as a viable commercial demographic in mainstream corporate culture (who can buy a million magazines). This means we must examine Selena and her death closely to understand the globalized imaginings of Chicana female body it projected, and continues to project. By locating Selena and her remembrance in popular culture, we can better understand how narratives equating globalized Latina identity are necessarily too equated with violence. Her premature death is what elevated her cultural visibility. This is symptomatic of the ideology that Bolaño lays out in his novel, which is primarily why it warrants such intensive discussion. It represents the conflation of the subjective with the financial, the soul with the commoditized body, as well as the larger cultural implications of these conceptualizations.

Selena's premature death left the rest of her life a blank slate that offers itself as a site for repositories too of projected cultural wishes, dreams, and desires. In this way, her cultural manifestations represent Jacques Lacan's conception that, "our desire is never properly our own, but is created through fantasies that are caught up in cultural ideologies rather than material sexuality... What we are seeing is never really the thing, is never really our subjective experience of the thing either – the whole act of signification is how

we understand, place, and conceptualize our subjective experience” (Felluga). The cultural performance of Selena’s memory speaks to this distinctly, and the same logic can be transposed when speaking to the way that she took on a vivified cultural presence after her death.

Essential to note also is that these definitions of female, Chicana, Tejana, Latina (and American) identity are not static, reachable points of knowledge. Examining the cultural wake left by Selena’s death allows us to come to understand these categories as active systems of contestation and dialogue: fluid concepts in a fluid place. In this way Selena is a mirror of Gloria Anzaldua’s conception of border identity as “...hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool. From this radical, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollination, an “alien” consciousness is presently in the making – a new *mestiza* consciousness, *una conceiencia de mujer*. It is a consciousness of the Borderlands (75).

American filmmaker Lourdes Portillo provides a contemplative point of entry into this conversation in her 1999 documentary *Corpus: A Home Movie for Selena*. Her film, which she describes as being prompted by what she calls her own “internalized racism,” and disbelief that “this brown girl had gotten to be so famous,” will function as a primary text for examining the systems of cultural meaning Selena’s remembrance speaks to.

Perhaps it is first helpful to locate the site of cultural contestation from which Selena emerged: *la frontera*. Geography of course is a factor in the ideology of globalization. While literally, this is the space between the US and Mexican border, culturally, it is, as Ilan Stavans describes in his article “Santa Selena,”

Where NAFTA and Kafka cohabit, where English isn't spoken but broken, and where *yo* becomes I, and where I becomes *Ay, carajo* – a free zone, autonomous and self-referential, perceived by Mexicans as *el fin del mundo* (the end of the world), and by Anglo-Americans as a galaxy of *rascuachismo* (bad taste). (70)

Selena as a pop star is indicative of this dialectical understanding of identity, and is a proxy for a modern conception of subjectivity.

By locating Selena, a Tejana woman, born to a Mexican family in America, at this complicated site of ambiguous and conflicting meanings, her position as a symbolic figure already becomes clear. Selena was born in Corpus Christi, Texas, and grew up speaking English. Her family had lived in the United States for several generations, and though her most popular songs were in Spanish, she only learned the language later in life and struggled with its mastery quite publicly (Paredes 9). This complex dynamic is specifically identified by an anonymous fan Portillo interviews in her documentary. The woman states, “[In America], she was more Mexican than American, and in Mexico, she was more American than Mexican” (1999). This quote identifies Selena as an emblematic figure of Chicana identity, “omnipresent in *la frontera*,” as Ilan Stavans asserts, “the focal point of collective suffering – a patron saint of sorts” (70). If we can understand the complicated cultural context of both belonging and not that Selena comes from, then conceptualizations of her remembering become imbued with larger, more political meanings. Selena’s ideological location is analogous to the one Gloria Anzaldúa identifies in her poem “To live in the Borderlands means you.” It is the condition of being “caught in the crossfire between camps/ while carrying all five races on your back/ not knowing which side to turn to, run from” (194).

While visions of *la frontera* and Selena's relationship to the complicated identities one finds there might seem impossibly dense, Deborah Paredez provides us with a useful ideological tool of dissection in her concept of "Selenidad". She defines the term as the examination of the space left in Selena's wake "where memory, performance, and Latina/o identity gather" (6), and as "a contested, created, and critical set of endeavors [that] is indebted to scholarship in recent years that has revealed how acts of cultural memory and collective mourning can generate and transform concepts of national, racial, and gendered identities" (23). This is useful not only for gaining insight into Selena's complicated relationship to *la frontera*, which is also the world Portillo's documentary presents us with, but also to implications of Selena's death on a larger scale as a performance of cultural memory in the context of globalized economic order, and the violence and exploitation inherent in its structure. If we can assume, as Emma Perez does, that "a collective memory reconstructs the alienated group's history, whether real or imagined" (78), then "Selenidad" is that memory. In this way, Paredez's invented term captures the complicated system of processes that are most fruitful to analyze. It is not necessarily Selena herself that is the most interesting point of this debate, but instead her position, as Portillo states, as a "repository for a lot of ideals and desires," again harkening back to Lacan's ideas of the inseparability of subjective and cultural desire. Paredez's classification equips us with the ideological lens through which we can better understand these ideals and desires as mirrors of cultural understanding. The dark, revolving core at the center of these conceptions speaks specifically to the ways that cultural ideology creates these narratives that equate Latina identity and violence.

It follows then that death figures centrally in Paredez's conceptualization of "Selenidad". Indeed, Selena is available to us as a site of cultural memory primarily because of the brief and unfulfilled nature of her life. Ilan Stavans points this out by stating, "the collective imagination is stronger than anything reality has to offer" (36). When she died in 1995, the singer was on the brink of a major breakthrough, poised to cross over from localized Tejana pop-stardom into Madonna levels of mainstream success (Stavans 70 Paredez 22). This is a fact that worked to make her both a martyr and a blank slate for projections of Chicana identity, both on *la frontera* and in America as a whole. Her death, as Stavans further observes, kept her from being "forced to confront the conundrum of assimilation" (41). While this is a concept I will revisit with greater care later in my discussion, it is still an important informing part of the cultural context of which Selena is part of, and should be addressed as the foundation for conceptualizations of "Selenidad".

Now that we can locate "Selenidad" on *la frontera*, and have established the idea of her memory as a performance of collective identity, what can we understand Portillo's *Corpus* to mean? Portillo herself provides a significant starting point, by offering at the beginning of the film that as a Chicana she feels, "We need to see our experiences validated. Otherwise we don't exist" (1999). Though Portillo's film resists static reading, perhaps this statement functions as its thesis. The documentary includes countless stories from women of personal identification with Selena, which function for Chicanas as, according to Paredez, "a means of proclaiming a (re)vision of their own historically devalued bodies" (137). Perhaps this revisioning has the most at stake with the plethora of young Selena devotees Portillo films and interviews, whom she identifies as the

“hardcore fans” (1999). To these fans, “Selenidad” provides a model for navigating the confusing cultural messages they receive about their bodies. Sandra Cisneros, in her piece “Guadalupe the Sex Goddess,” describes the confusion she felt about her own body and sexuality as a young Chicana woman, and universalizes her experience by saying, “I am overwhelmed by the silence regarding Latinas and our bodies... In the guise of modesty my culture locked me in a double chastity belt of ignorance and *vergüenza*, shame.”

Cisneros’s experience supports the larger assertion Portillo makes in her film about Selena that “[Chicana girls] saw in her what they could be. They couldn’t be like the blonde Barbie, but they could be Selena.” In this way too we can see Selena existing as, “the transformation of reality into images,” a process Fredric Jameson asserts as central to the project of postmodernism’s cultural logic (125).

Simply by existing as a public figure on a public stage, Selena’s presence works to break the silence Cisneros talks about. Indeed, Portillo’s documentary contains many scenes of young girls mimicking parts of Selena’s sexualized image. In one particular sequence at the Tejano Fine Arts Academy, we see images of six different girls performing in Selena’s likeness. The girls, who are mostly preteens, adopt her style of dancing, her brassy, body-conscious clothing, dark red lipstick, and melodramatic style of singing about grand themes of love and passion. Through these adopted behaviors, one can clearly observe how Selena provides a mode of sexual identification for these girls; they are quite literally performing her memory. Chicana feminist Cherríe Moraga states this explicitly in a later scene in the film. She says,

What’s interesting is – it’s like Selena gave these girls a way to have Chicana sexuality... You know, they’re in their bodies *totally*. They’re doing their little

Figure 1: Still from *Corpus: A Home Movie for Selena*.
Portillo, 1999.



[gestures to indicate dramatic dancing with hands]. I mean, good dancers, really good dancers. And you know, like, there wasn't any of this typical – particularly at that age with that preteen stuff, you know – no *vergüenza* [shame] (1999).

Critical to note here is the connection between the *vergüenza* Cisneros originally diagnoses, and the lack of shame Moraga then picks up on. “Selenidad” offers a conduit for these young women to understand and explore their identity as sexually realized beings. What this specific scene points out to us is that it is that Chicana sexuality becomes *possible* for these young women through “Selenidad”. Julie Bettie characterizes the feminist implications of this ideological gesture in her book, *Women Without Class: Girls, Race and Identity*. These girls create, in Selena’s image, a “symbolic economy of style... by making claims to stylistic authenticity” (61). Through their interpretation of and identification with “Selenidad”, they define and understand themselves. In this way, theory becomes practice, for these young girls, recalling Anzaldúa’s idea that, “the work of *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended” (102).

While this might superficially seem to give rise to optimism about positive identification, this is perhaps only superficial. Indeed, Bettie’s use of the word “economy” is telling. These girls are now able to locate a contextual point of identification and better understand themselves. Or, are they simply locating themselves

within existing cultural narratives about sexuality? They are encouraged to be unique while they are encouraged to conform. Is Selena symptomatic of an ideology of inclusion into a damning "power" such as Foucault talks about? By imitating here, these girls conforming to the warming "discipline" he delineates: a control of bodies that functions under the guise of progressivism. Before one decides her presence is a powerful tool of affirmation and ontological feminist possibility, let us consider Edward Said's conception: "One aspect of the electronic, postmodern world is that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient [which here can be transposed as *la frontera*] is viewed. Television, the films, and all the media's resources have forced information into more and more standardized molds" (26). Horkheimer and Adorno elaborate on this troubling conflation too, presciently asserting,

The striking unity of microcosm and macrocosm presents men with a model of their culture: the false identity of the general and the particular. Under monopoly all mass culture is identical, and the lines of its artificial framework begin to show through. The people at the top are no longer so interested in concealing monopoly: as its violence becomes more open, so its power grows. (120-21)

Indeed, these systems of power are comprehensive, large, and total. The identification the girls have with Selena then can be understood to extend far beyond their bodies.

Language is another sphere of identification that "Selenidad" has made relevant to these girls, and operates with the same fundamental, contradictory dialectical tension of inclusion and subjugation. The mother of one young performer states, "It's great because I speak Spanish a lot. Not until now, after Selena's death, can [my daughter] talk back to me and tell me exactly what it is she wants because Selena has brought this sound to her

[and told her] it can be done if you want to do it" (1999). Here, we can clearly observe how the daughter's identification with Selena has led her to accept her identity as a Spanish-speaker (let us not forget the singer's real-life struggles with mastering the language). Again here we see how the cultural narrative – the music video, the interview, becomes more important than biography when looking at this phenomenon. This notion becomes complicated when one considers that Selena only learned Spanish later in life, which is an idea that privileges "Selenidad" over Selena, again, lending credence to the notion that culture is a performance of memory. Note that her mother specifies too that it is after Selena *died* that her daughter became interested in Spanish. Telling also is her assertion that Selena carries a message that "it can be done if you want to do it." This language of possibility indicates that "Selenidad" provides an articulation of Spanish-speaking identity that these girls *want* to become a part of. Instead of understanding Spanish as the language of the "unassimilated" (Paredes 143) on *la frontera* (and in the United States), through "Selenidad", Spanish becomes aspirational for young Chicanas. In this way, "Selenidad" works as a validating factor of language and identity to these girls. Selena makes it okay for them to take ownership of the Spanish language and reclaim it as a thing to be celebrated instead of suppressed. This makes their inclusion into these systems of objectification and power and gendered violence more total in essence, and dovetails again with Foucault's conceptions about discipline as an internalized locus of cultural control. Of this conception of discipline, he writes,

In the central position it occupies, it is not alone, but linked to a whole series of "carceral" mechanisms which seem distinct enough – since they are intended to alleviate pain, to cure, to comfort – but which all tend, like the prison, to exercise

a power of normalization. That these mechanisms are applied not to a transgressions against a “central” law, but to the apparatus of production—“commerce” and “industry”—to a whole multiplicity of illegalities, in all their diversity of nature and origin, their specific role in profit and the different ways in which they are dealt with by the punitive mechanisms. And that ultimately what presides over all these mechanisms is not the unitary functioning of an apparatus or an institution, but the necessity of combat and the rules of strategy. (308)

The girls in the film are aware too of the identification they have with Selena and how it functions. In a group interview, one girl says, “From Selena I realized you don’t have to have a certain look or anything...” She falters for a moment, then says, “you don’t have to have blonde hair or be blonde” (Portillo 1999). The girls then all erupt into laughter, a gesture that marks their tacit understanding of the point. If, as Susan Bordo argues in “The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity,” the female body is a medium of culture (309), then by identifying with Selena’s body (her brown skin, her dark undyed hair, etc.), these girls can understand themselves as belonging to her specific, identifiable brand of Chicana working-class glamor (Paredes 9).

This logic calls to mind a statement Portillo makes at the beginning of the film: “If there had been a Selena to look up to or a Sandra Cisneros on the television, then it probably would have made me feel like I belonged in this country.” Because “Selenidad” has provided these girls with a locus for identification, they *do* feel they belong. But again, what system do they feel like they belong to? Let us not forget her violent death. The punishment for transgression is a part of her narrative that gets buried, but is

fundamental to her contextualization. How do we deal with that? It instead reinforces this ideology to the girls. As Horkheimer and Adorno emphasize, “something is provided for all so that none may escape; the distinctions are emphasized and extended ...Everybody must behave (as if spontaneously) in accordance with his previously determined and indexed level, and choose the category of mass product turned out for his type” (123).

Selena's skin in particular functions as a point of fascination throughout the film that again reasserts this tension. There is a scene at a Los Angeles radio station where a caller remembers Selena by stating, “She was a beautiful person you know, and that made me feel great because I'm brown too and you know [what] people tend to think [about] these features and... I thought she was beautiful, and not only that, I mean her skin was so soft and *brown*” (1999). The speaker's impassioned tone (and imagined touch) speaks to the intensity of self-identification many Latinas felt with Selena. Deborah Paredez characterizes this particular kind of identification as an act of self-affirmation, noting, “This sense of homoerotic love for Selena served as a declaration of self-love for many young Latinas... Love for Selena is predicated upon her proximity and not her distance from oneself” (138). This act of identification can be read as an act of political resistance to hegemonic ideals of Anglicized beauty, but only superficially. By marking Selena as “brown” and marking her as their own, Chicanas are simultaneously acknowledging and rejecting repressive “dominant U.S. representations of feminine ideals” (Paredez 138). Instead of reading cause for agency, this dynamic is indicative of the way that the dominant, globalized culture creates a space for a new demographic under the guise of progressivism and enlightenment, while still tacitly reinforcing the connection between Chicana bodies and death. These are all conversations about Selena that took place in her

memory. See the sense of imagined touch? It is the cultural idea that they are praying to and not the person. In this way too one can observe the validity of Horkheimer and Adorno's insight that "the might of industrial society is lodged in men's minds" (52), continuing, "this promise held out by work of art that it will create truth by lending new shape to the conventional social forms as is necessary as it is hypocritical. It unconditionally posits the real forms of life as it is by suggesting that fulfillment lies in the their aesthetic derivatives. To this extent the claim of art is always ideology too."

While these elements of the portrait of "Selenidad" are problematic, the film is not entirely rosy in its imaginings of the singer. Later in *Corpus*, Sandra Cisneros discusses the counterpoint to the praise her peers like Cherríe Moraga bestow upon Selena's cultural significance by pointing out the controlling role Selena's father/manager played in her life and development, as well as death's validating power in the narrative of her life. She explains:

There [are] some things I think she stands for that are very dangerous, like she dropped out of school, her father had her working, he made her quit school – He's telling her to go up there and be twelve-year-old sexy-child. That's not a model that I would want for young women, and the fact that that's the only outlet you have, is to be seen as this sexual being. But that's the only outlet we have here—that you have to die before you're 25 years old. That's how you get on the cover of *Texas Monthly*. You either get bludgeoned, raped, or shot if you're Chicana.

That's the only way you get on the cover (Portillo 1999).

Cisneros's appraisal of the complex web of associative meanings complicit in "Selenidad" here is apt. The central role death in particular has to Selena's cultural



Figure 2: Still from *Corpus* (Portillo, 1999).

valorization is problematic when one considers her as a role model for young girls. Does this teach young women that to be accepted in their culture is to be sexualized, and to be sexualized is to be put in danger? Indeed Portillo makes this exact assumption, noting

Selena, with her glitzy, revealing costumes and expressive dancing, “is very sexual, and in our culture, to be very sexual is a dangerous thing” (1999). If young girls see Selena as an aspirational role model, it would seem they are participating in a dialectic that equates Chicana sexuality with violence and/or death. This is the narrative that is constantly being reinforced, through identification with her skin, her language, and her image. These girls might find strength in the fact that they do not look like Barbie and can still be beautiful, but Barbie cannot die. Selena is a more dangerous cultural point of identification because she did die: violently, prematurely. Foucault again here is helpful: “The carceral network does not cast the unassimilable into a confused hell; there is no outside... It saves everything, including what it punishes” (301).

Consider these points in conjunction too with the economic influence of Selena’s death. Apart from the issue of *People Weekly* previously discussed, Ilan Stavans notes her continuing presence “on TV screens and CDs, on book covers and calendars, on velvet slippers and plastic bracelets, on shampoo bottles and makeup advertisements, on designer clothes and piñatas” (41). By observing the sheer amount of merchandise associated with Selena, we can make a problematic connection between her violent death

and her posthumous commercial presence. As Susan Bordo points out, “television is, of course, the great teacher here, our prime modeler of plastic pluralism” (258). The narrative of violent death of Chicana women in this way becomes marketable, buyable; a product to be consumed by impressionable young people. A tangible example of this dynamic exists in Portillo’s documentary. In a scene at Selena’s grave in Corpus Christi, Texas, we see a mother and three young girls, presumably her daughters. The mother describes their collective ritual of placing a Selena Barbie doll (itself a complex commercial object, considering the previously discussed implications of Selena as the “anti-Barbie” for young Chicanas) on the grave of the singer, drawing full circle the symbiotic relationship between commercial and emotional representations of “Selenidad”. I bring up these connections as a necessary counterpoint to the narratives of agency “Selenidad” (superficially) works to encourage. To understand Selena’s cultural significance is to wrest with conflicting ideas about the way globalized economic ideology creates narratives that equate Latinas with disposability, violence and death. Though this might even be easier to see in the way that Bolaño delineates the problem for us in 2666 (the violence is gruesome, glaring, undeniable), is this not more dangerous for the velvet (or sequined) glove that the ideology comes lined in? The phenomenon of “Selenidad” is important because it demonstrates to us the ways that ideology creates messages for us: it is not in glaring capital letters, but buried in contradictory sentiments that can in some contexts even be superficially read as agency. Bolaño’s depiction of the femicide in Ciudad Juárez is the extension of this kind of ideology. Here, one can observe the manifestation of Žižek’s ideas about the broader ways violence operates in all parts of our culture: “The lesson of the intricate relationship between subjective and

systemic violence is that violence is not a direct property of some acts, but is distributed between acts and their contexts, between activity and inactivity” (213). As potentially passive as listening to a song or viewing an image might seem, it is never wholly outside the projections of power that work to animate it.

Indeed, the connection between Chicana cultural celebration and death is not unique to Selena. This is a microcosm of a trend that is everywhere, sometimes nascently, quietly, or even loudly in front of our faces but in a friendly voice. Paredez confronts this idea directly in her book, tying Selena to a larger cultural trend that includes Eva Perón and Frida Kahlo as symbolic martyrs for Latina agency (7). Elisabeth Bronfen, in her book *Over Her Dead Body*, explores this repeating narrative of venerated feminine corpses as a way for the dominant culture to normalize opposition: female agency and death. She writes, “The threat that death and femininity pose is recuperated by representation, staging absence as a form of re-presence, or return, even if or rather precisely because this means appeasing the threat of real mortality, of sexual insufficiency, of lack of plenitude and wholeness” (xii). This is precisely what “Selenidad” is accomplishing.

This logic becomes intensified when one considers its specific application in the context of *la frontera*. The threat to dominant forces becomes compounded by the complicated informing parts that create border identity, which in its very un-stasis it represents a threat to definable categorizations. Who is an American? What is a Mexican American female like? Selena’s dead body provides answers to these questions through representation. It is at once visible and silent: it provides us the satisfaction of presence without the complications of voice. Once we understand this, it becomes unsurprising

that due to the demands of the nearly fifty thousand fans that attended Selena's funeral, her coffin was opened for viewing during the last hour of the public visitation (Paredes 6). It is convenient, and it spells out ideology to us in ways that find their extension in 2666.

Stacy Schultz, in her article "Latina Identity: Reconciling Ritual, Culture, and Belonging" traces the historical connection between Chicanas, death, and sacrifice, and identifies it as symptomatic of a term she calls Marianism. This concept understands Latina identity in relief to Central American cultural norms of male machismo. She states it is dependent on the idea that "A woman can only assume power through rituals of submission that offer access to ecstatic states through sacrifice" (15). The narrative of tragic female death (the ultimate form of submission) that "Selenidad" offers us works as an active example of Marianism's defining principles, and is a problematic conflation of the local with the global. This idea is buttressed by countless personal remembrances of Selena fans, such as one man from South Texas who describes her as a "celestial beauty whose time on earth was spent helping the poor and unattended" (Stavans 36). Here, a saintly and self-sacrificing image of the star emerges, reminiscent of that most dominating of Latina archetypes, the *Virgen de Guadalupe*. Another woman prays to a special altar to Selena she has erected in her home in the image of the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, reciting to it each night, "Please, Selena, let me remain a virgin ...just like you" (Stavans 36). This marks a deliberate parting with reality, and speaks to the cultural desire to foist narratives of Marianism onto a publicly identifiable site of female memory. These personal manifestations of "Selenidad" can be read as a conservative reimagining of repressive patriarchal ideas of feminine chaste-ness and self-sacrifice. This further

complicates the avenues of female agency that the performance of Selena's memory provides. Understanding the conflicting and simultaneous presence of these ideas is essential to reaching a more complete understanding of "Selenidad"'s myriad functions. She is seen as enabling while all the while she is reinforcing, much like Foucault's idea of how power operates in modern society².

Latina artist Coco Fusco, inspired by the troubling connection between Selena's violent death and her posthumous celebrity, conceptualized a 1997 performance piece titled *Better Yet When Dead*. Performed twice, Fusco laid for several hours in a satin-lined coffin surrounded by roses, pretending to be dead (Schultz 16). In a statement, she clarified the philosophical intentions of her piece:

Clearly, there are aspects of Catholicism that celebrate female suffering as a virtue, and which have been used to encourage Latin women to accept mental and physical abuse; however, it seems to me that the stakes are raised when female artists are involved in the equation, in that the very ambivalence toward ceding access to women in public life expresses itself perfectly in the sharp change in attitudes toward women artists before and after their death. It is almost as if a violent death makes them more acceptably feminine. (16)

Much evidence for this statement can be found in Portillo's film as well. In an interview, radio personality Vincente Carranza states of Selena, "when she died she became part of our soul" (1999). Key here is the emphasis Carranza places on death: it becomes the

² "The carceral texture of society assures both the real capture of the body and its perpetual observation; it is, by its very nature, the apparatus of punishment that conforms most completely to the new economy of power and the instrument for the formation of knowledge that this very economy needs. Its panoptic function enables it to play this double role," *Discipline and Punish* (1499).

enabling force in her transformation to sainthood. The characterization of Selena being a part of the ‘soul’ of her fans is not an incidental word either, and harkens back to Foucault’s idea of the creation of subjectivity as an essential informing part of the ways culture works to imprint its messages onto our ontological understandings of ourselves.

This key assertion from *Discipline and*

Punish can easily be transposed to

“Selenidad”:

But let there be no misunderstanding: it is not that a real man, the object of knowledge, philosophical reflection or technological intervention, has been substituted for the soul, the illusion of theologians. The man described for us, whom we are invited to free, is already in himself the effect of a subjection more profound than himself. A “soul” inhabits him and brings him to existence, which is itself a factor in the mastery that power exercises over the body. The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body.

(30)

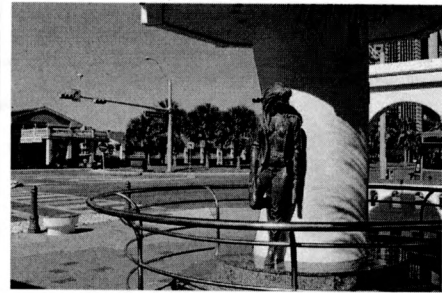
This language of ownership through death pervades many of the fan interviews Portillo conducts, and emphasizes the concept Fusco discusses of violence being a feminizing force. The subtext of each of these interviews seems to be the same: Selena was significant in life, but even more significant in death. In this way, “Selenidad” works to reinforce the notion that suffering and death are essential parts of feminine narratives of



Figure 3: Image of Coco Fusco’s *Better Yet When Dead*, 1997. Via <http://www.thing.net/~cocofusco/performance/betteryet/betteryet1.htm>

Though this scene might read as cause for optimism, Deborah Paredez reports a development that speaks to the constantly changing nature of “Selenidad” and its cultural implications. While Portillo’s documentary was released in 1999, Paredez’s book, published ten years later in 2009, gives a more current picture of the memorial. The graffiti and planks for writing have been removed, and the memorial is now circled by a metal barrier that precludes one from touching the statue. A new plaque is in place as well, which states (in both Spanish and English), “Show your respect. Please – no markings” (Paredez 57). The possibility of communication has been snuffed out completely, effectively turning the memorial from an active place of remembrance to a mausoleum. The colorful graffiti from the past has been painted over with white paint too, working quite literally to whitewash it (Paredez 61). City officials from Corpus Christi made this change because they claimed the graffiti was too pervasive, and grew to cover the entire monument. This required constant attention and maintenance. Regardless of the stated motivation, the implications of this “whitewashing” are clear: by choosing how people are allowed to experience the memorial (i.e. passively, from a distance), the government is effectively regulating the cultural canonization of the singer. In this way, the government of Corpus Christi has worked to appropriate “Selenidad”. What was once more difficult to read has now become much clearer; the singer very much exists within a conservative framework of globalized ideology. While some semblance of communication, of agency, or control, of positive identification, might have been initially salvaged, these conduits of expression

Figure 5: *Current Selena memorial. Image via*



are now effectively roped off. This dynamic is a microcosm of a global trend of Anglicized centers of powers working to effectively control and regulate the cultural production of Latina identity, and specifically, equating Chicana feminine agency with a necessary narrative of violence. Latinas have a place in the system, but it is very much operating within the larger framework of ideology.

Sandra Cisneros captures the dynamic of this complicated problem succinctly in a conversation towards the conclusion of *Corpus*. While discussing the death of the singer, she states, "I'm not a Selena fan. But I have a Selena keychain. And the only reason why I have it is because I went to the [gas station] and it's the first time I ever saw a Chicana on a keychain that wasn't the *Virgen de Guadalupe*. I had to buy it" (1999). Selena's image on a keychain and Cisneros's fascination with it speaks to the wealth of representations "Selenidad" represents: she is a commercial object, a Madonna and *the* Madonna, a sex object and a saint, a commercial entity and an aspirational model of hybridity. She is everywhere, nowhere, available to us at all times. Here we see the ways that culture feeds us narratives about the necessary connection between Latina sexuality and death.

Let us turn again to Foucault for a more through understanding of the function, scope, and power of the dead singer's voice. Just as Foucault argues in "What is an Author?" that any text is implicated in a complex web of cultural relationships of signification, so too is Selena's voice emblematic of a broader cultural ideology:

Perhaps the time has come to study not only the expressive value and formal transformations of discourse, but its mode of existence: the modifications and variations, within any culture, of modes of circulation, valorization, attribution

and appropriation. Partially at the expense of themes and concepts that an author places in his work, the “author-function” could also reveal the manner in which discourse is articulated on the basis of social relationships. (137)

Those specific social relationships, between Latina bodies, the flow of global capital, and their inextricable links to gendered violence as implicated in the way culture operates indeed are articulated by the cultural performance of Selena’s memory, and her position as an author of popular culture. We might ask, “What matter who’s singing?”³ But in examining the powers that even make the articulation of this voice possible, we hear endless others refracted back to us in a larger chorus of globalized power.

³ As Foucault famously concludes in “What Is an Author”: “What matter who’s speaking?” (138).

Part 2

“No one pays attention to these killings, but the secret of the world is hidden in them”:

Gender, Globalization, and Death in Roberto Bolaño's 2666

*For it must be cried out, at a time when some have the audacity to neo-evangelize in the name of the ideal of a liberal democracy that has finally realized itself as the ideal of human history: never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression effected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity. Instead of singing the advent of the ideal of liberal democracy and of the capitalist market in the euphoria of the end of history, instead of celebrating the 'end of ideologies' and the end of the great emancipatory discourses, let us never neglect this obvious macroscopic fact, made up of innumerable singular sites of suffering: no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, have so many men, women and children been subjugated, starved or exterminated on the earth – Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx**

Published in 2004 one year after his death, Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño's 2666 represents a globalized, fractured, temporally and thematically sprawling novel, its English translation clocking in just short of 900 pages. Critical attempts to categorize the text have resulted in understandable synonymous consternation and praise⁴. It is a text that is emblematic of many complicated and emergent worldwide trends that incorporate the economic, social, cultural, and literary trends that coalesce to create what Randolph D. Pope categorizes as “transgressive in its aesthetic, on the one hand, and on the other it offers a recognizable view of our current condition” (162).

Divided into five parts that span time, location, and narrative voice, the novel is most centrally concerned with systems of death, violence, and the deterioration of

⁴ For a more comprehensive analysis of the book's varied worldwide critical reception, see Randolph D. Pope's article “A Writer for a Globalized Age: Roberto Bolaño and 2666” in *Old Margins and New Centers: The European Literary Heritage in an Age of Globalization* (P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2011).

societal and personal order, and the text maps the prime locale of these breakdowns in Bolaño's fictional Mexican city of Santa Teresa (meant to symbolize Ciudad Juárez), tracing the violent and repeating mysterious murders of women and girls who live there. Indeed, the title of the novel comes from Bolaño's novella *Amulet*, in which the "disconsolate poet" (Deckard 367) Auxilio Lacouture describes Mexico City as "a cemetery from the year 2666. A cemetery forgotten under a dead or unborn eyelid, bathed in the dispassionate fluids of an eye that, for wanting to forget something, has ended forgetting everything," (Bolaño 86). It follows then that repeating systems of death, violence, and relationships between center and margins are at the text's dark core; these are the primary issues it engages with and urges readers to recognize as systems that have strong foundational roots in very real, existing structures of power.

So how to categorize this text? While it borrows parts of postmodernism's literary traditions in its extensive discussions of violence, disorder, and death (temporal distortion, a merging of high/low culture, maximalism, faction, etc.), its investment in social issues in particular, as well as vivid, often visceral realism, is outside of postmodernism's ironic insularity (Jameson 149). This is important because through examining 2666, it might be possible to observe how moving forward, writers might salvage parts of postmodernism's literary usefulness in a broader social context through divorcing it from irony's solipsism and unproductive obsession with cleverness.

But what is the broader social context Bolaño's text is speaking to? It certainly is not bound, as Sharae Deckard perceptively argues in her article "Peripheral Realism, Millennial Capitalism, and Roberto Bolaño's 2666," "to more modern Latin American traditions of magical realism because of the novel's lack of supernatural and otherworldly

occurrences.”⁵ Though Deckard concedes that the text is “bound by a web of recurring spectral motifs – voids, rats, hells, cannibals, zombies, dreams” (369), all of the book’s apocalyptic feelings come not from the immaterial world, but from the intensity of the material world itself. Indeed, there are countless deaths, but no ghosts. She continues that the text “does not deal in supernatural events narrated in a naturalist style but appropriates a language of the spectral or supernatural to narrate a totality experienced as unreal” (355), instead creating a “pyrotechnical neobaroque” (363) based in reality, not magic, that imbues its maximalist aesthetic through its unblinking engagement with physical violence.

The book’s economic connections are an essential informing part of what keeps it so distant from these supernatural categories as well. The way that the text repeatedly connects violence to recurring systems of power speaks to its thematic deconstruction of social relations under millennial capitalism. This is the only appropriate form of realism for a time and place so broken and fractured by globalization. As Arjun Appadurai writes, “even an elementary model of global political economy must take into account the deeply disjunctive relationships among human movement, technological flow, and financial transfers” (35). Sharae Deckard’s analysis of the book mirrors Appadurai’s assertion, writing, “2666 can be understood as an equally insurgent attempt to reformulate the realist world novel in order to overcome the reification of earlier modes of realism and register the changed historical situation of Latin America in the era of millennial capital”

⁵ Bolaño made his contempt for Gabriel Marcia Marquez especially plain in his own lifetime (Pope, 160), once referring to magical realism as “the rancid private club full of cobwebs presided over by Vargas Llosa, García Márquez, Fuentes, and other pterodactyls,” (Moya) most likely because of his perception of the genre as more comforting than confrontational.

(353). The significant connections Bolaño makes between death and globalized systems of economic order represent the key ideological project of his text. They find a centerpiece in the book's longest section, "The Part About the Crimes," which explore the real-life events of the feminicide in Juárez through the fictional city of Santa Teresa.

The problematic relationship capitalism fosters between bodies, labor and exploitation is by no means a conversation that Bolaño has begun, but instead one that he adds a unique voice to that has specific implications in regards to globalization and gender in a Latin American context. Since the emergence of the Industrial Age, this relationship has exponentially grown in scope and force, enabled by technology and globalization (Spivak, Appadurai). Late capitalism, fueled by the proliferation of mass media and multinational corporations, has only worked to intensify the exploitative nature of these relationships by wholly subsuming the being of the laborers into its modes of production, obfuscating the lines between person/product (Mandel). Fredric Jameson's specific characterization of this synthesis as emblematic of cultural production speaks to inseparability of modes of thought and modes of economics (313). When we see an image in the media, is that image motivated by cultural or capital impetuses? This is hardly the most troubling question prompted by recognizing these systems of power: what happens to the bodies of those who are exploited to propagate it? If we can understand the United States as the center of this globalized economic order, then it follows that Mexico works as its receptacle, existing as a Picture of Dorian Gray to our projected images of economic prosperity and progress. Maquiladoras, massive factories established in Mexico by American companies that export their products back to the United States, function as a nexus of this exploitative relationship. This is then, of course,

where Bolaño places the dark eye of the storm of his novel: in the fictionalized city of Santa Teresa, populated with dumps, criminals, and corrupt policemen.

The victims of this transaction, the excrement of this digestion of late capitalism, are Latinas, who comprise the majority of workers in these factories, which are often located in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. A parallel phenomenon has risen in the wake of these factories: the violent, unexplained deaths of the women working there. Before dissecting Bolaño's treatment of this phenomenon, it is essential to have a foundational discussion of its historical background. Since 1993, hundreds of young women and girls from Ciudad Juárez have suffered brutal, unexplained deaths that authorities have been unable to or connect or resolve (Wright 75). To this day, over 1000 women are murdered in Mexico every year (Lagarde y de los Rios xvii). The association between the dominant systems of economic/cultural power and the deaths of these women are not coincidental. This is the machine at the core of Bolaño's text. Though the novel covers many interconnected systems of power, it is clear that to him this feminicide is the distillation of the plethora of factors the book encompasses. As Edward Said explains in *Orientalism*,

There is nothing mysterious or natural about authority. It is formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental, it is persuasive; it has status, it establishes canons or taste and value; it is virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true, and from traditions, perceptions, and judgments it forms, transmits, and reproduces. (19)

2666 makes this much clear. "No one pays attention to these killings," Bolaño writes just before "The Part About the Crimes," "but the secret of the world is hidden in them" (348). The "secret of the world" is the ideology that his book works to trace.

It follows then that “The Part About the Crimes” comprises the largest portion of the book at nearly 300 pages. Bolaño describes the bodies of these women as they are found, often mutilated and abandoned in the maquiladora’s dumps, furthering the assertion that the women are the philosophical and physical byproducts of multinational corporations, objectively describing the possessions found on the victim. These descriptions pile into the hundreds in Bolaño’s book, defying narrative linearity, creating a sense of chaos. Just as the circumstances of the victim’s life and death are varied, so too are the possible perpetrators. Boyfriends? Husbands? Gangs? The police? The descriptions Bolaño provides are not clues that lead us towards a single point: the reader instead begins to understand that the perpetrators of these ideas are larger than a single person or entity. It is a broader ideology that in essence *allows* these patterns of violence to keep repeating.

Bolaño’s text doesn’t offer a solution of course, just like it never finds an answer to why these deaths keep happening. The power of the novel instead lies in the way that it creates nuanced and layered systems of meaning that map connections for the reader that transcend myopic ideas related to creating a temporally and morally normative narratives of epistemological wholeness. As Marx famously wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, ““They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented”” (182).

Indeed, the phenomenon of violent death in conjunction with overarching systems of social and economic control described in Bolaño’s novel is not unique to Mexico, because it is part of a larger global economic ideology. Just as his book suggests the deep and inextricable cultural roots that can be traced to repeating systems of gendered

⁶ Incidentally, this is also the epigraph in Said’s *Orientalism*.

violence and death, this is a conversation that begins culturally and socially *in media res*. In her book *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism*, Melissa W. Wright finds examples of these exploitative relationships of power, gender, and economics in South Asia and across Central America. The implications of the problem Bolaño's text speaks to however, reach beyond even national economies and cultures: the omnipotence and totality of globalization in every sphere of our lives from the products we buy to the media we consume to the content we read on the internet is not outside of these systems of exploitation. Who suffers in these exchanges and why? It is our duty to understand the dynamics of these complicated and problematic relationships and understand how our own choices implicitly sanction them.

Wright notes that the women in the maquiladoras she examines in her study were corporate objects, "manufactured during the labor process via discourses that combine bits and pieces of workers' bodies with industrial processes and managerial expectations" (45). So too are the women Bolaño describes reduced to mangled bodies that obfuscate their subjectivity: their identification is only possible many times by the objects found with their bodies, often listed clinically, objectively. Bolaño writes of a woman who was stabbed to death, found wearing "jeans, a blue shirt, and Nike sneakers" (360), another wearing "a bra, denim skirt, and Reebok sneakers" (423), another still, "in Lee jeans, a sweatshirt, and a red vest" (467). These catalogued descriptions amass beyond counting in this section of the book. A clear connection here exists too in the identification of the women only by the logo-ed items on their body, emblematic even in death of globalized power. Lordes Portillo's 2001 documentary on the feminicide in Ciudad Juárez, *Señorita Extraviada*, contains first-person interviews with the family members of the victims from

maquiladoras that corroborate these ties. In the film, parents speak of police stations with rooms full of unorganized piles of clothing as the only available evidence.

Wright's book too represents the real-life reality of corporately connected violence. She deconstructs the dialectical nature of the female workers in maquiladoras as unskilled laborers (46). She follows the practices of a corporation she calls "COSMO," who in the mid 1990s was incorporating increasingly sophisticated production techniques in their mass-production electronic assembly operations. Though the labor performed by the women was categorized as unskilled because of the repetition of the processes they completed on the assembly lines, Wright challenges this notion, arguing that these women are "thinking and responsive members of a flexible system that constantly conforms to changing market demands" (50). These unskilled processes, she observed, included circuitry and soldering performances in which the women were asked to perform nine separate tasks within twenty-two seconds. In this way, she notes of female maquiladora workers, "her anatomical parts are rearranged and assessed in relation to the needs of a factory system that does indeed require skilled work from her but that does not give her credit for the skill" (Wright 52). Here, one hears clear echoes of Foucault's conceptualization of the way that power operates in a larger, more total ideological expression. His examination of discipline in Mettray bears telling similarities to the maquiladoras Wright examines in her book:

The modeling of the body produces a knowledge of the individual, the apprenticeship of the techniques induces modes of behavior and the acquisition of skills is inextricably linked with the establishment of power relations; strong, skilled agricultural workers are produced; in this very work, provided it is

technically supervised, submissive subjects are produced and a dependable body of knowledge built up about them. This disciplinary technique exercised upon the body had a double effect: a 'soul' to be known and a subjection to be maintained. (295)

This exploitation is further reinforced by the repetition of these skilled processes, which when performed for hour and days on end, lead to well-documented depression, boredom, and injury (Lin 1991). Wright found this attitude enunciated quite clearly by managers at COSMO who conceded, "this isn't the kind of work you do for a long time" (57), continuing, "When the older workers get tired, we replace them with new ones. It's very simple... That's how it is in Mexico" (Wright 57, 61). The plain language of disposability here speaks very clearly to the combined systems of economics and misogyny that have foundational roots in the violent crimes towards women in Ciudad Juárez, a city that has since become "emblematic of women's suffering" (Segato 70).

Bolaño's listing of the deaths speaks to the connections Wright maps. Their bodies are found in dumps and abandoned like litter on the side of highways. When a beaten but still alive woman is found by the side of the road, questions of capital remain at the fore of her existence:

After a while an ambulance came from the hospital and the medics wanted to know who would pay for the ride. The knife sharpener explained that he and the ice cream vendor had found the women lying on the ground. I know, said the medic, but what I care now is finding out who will take responsibility for her. How can I take responsibility for a person when I don't even know her name? Asked the knife sharpener. Well, somebody has to, said the medic" (Bolaño 357).

The woman dies while they quibble. This exchange relates the life of the woman to quantifiable monetary amounts (“who would pay for the ride”), and the refusal of the men around her to acknowledge her subjectivity, represent incidents that are not isolated, but instead symptoms of a larger social ideology the maquiladoras enforce in their very structures of power and order.

Their comprehensive approach to the continuation of these systems of gender-based violence speaks to the social core of the issues Bolaño is centrally concerned with in the text, most intensely in “The Part About the Crimes,” but also in the text as a whole. Fregoso’s and Bejarano’s conceptions create complex cartographies for the horrors Bolaño’s text is centrally concerned with, and thus are part of a foundational discussion about the connections to reality the book instigates. Drawing from a wealth of historical, legal, and socio-cultural sources, they define feminicide as “systemic, widespread, and everyday interpersonal violence... rooted in social, political, and cultural inequalities” (Fregoso, Bejarano, 5). Essential too is their conception of this systemic violence as “both public and private, implicating both the state (directly and indirectly) and individual perpetrators (private or state actors)” (5). In other words, though this violence has individual victims, it has more than individual perpetrators, the actions of whom are implicated in a much larger sociological web of gendered power in which the economic and political are implicated. Wright further ties these gendered narratives of violence to cultural ideas that through their repetition and social inextricability become “mythic themes” tied to women, where “suffering and sacrifice... are often required to move society in its proper direction” (6).

The “proper direction” of economic progress and supposed social mobility is

exemplified nowhere more clearly (nor more harmfully) than in the maquiladoras of Ciudad Juárez. In the latter half of the 20th century, these large industrial factories came to personify the city, functioning as an international locus of “low-cost, high-quality, labor intensive manufacturing processes” (Wright 7). The city’s proximity to the United States, along with favorable economic conditions proliferated in 1994 by NAFTA made the location favorable to international corporations, and its local pool of labor worked as a further contributing factor. There are over three thousand maquiladoras in Mexico who employ over one million workers, a quarter of which are located in Ciudad Juárez (Wright 79).

Though this first-hand experience works as objective evidence of the connections between gender, violence, and capital, this is by no means an individual anomaly of the “COSMO” corporation. Rita Laura Segato traces further ideological maps for these recurring systems of exploitation in her essay “Territory, Sovereignty, and the Crimes of the Second State,” connecting them to globalization and neoliberalism, with its “insatiable hunger for profit” (70). Grant Farred too ties these specific systems to the core ideology of Bolaño’s novel, which he characterizes as “an indictment of neoliberal capital... symptomatic of a larger globalized system of capital and genocide” (692). Bolaño’s treatment of the femicide in Juárez is primarily concerned, Farred further argues, with finding “a language and a logic” (693) for death perpetuated on such a massive, violent scale. The literal, plain language of the title is an aesthetic that is echoed throughout the entire section, which Deckard categorizes as “detached and meditative,” (357) as well as “hyperrealist, an empiricist stenography drained of emotion” (364). Though the first death the section details occurs in 1993, the narrator concedes, “But it’s

likely there had been other deaths before” (353). The implications of this language suggest not the beginning of a phenomenon, but rather its deep cultural implications that are impossible to trace to a finite start, instead deeply imbedded in structural, cultural systems of economics, power, and violence.

The language of Bolaño’s text also reifies the myth of disposability Wright speaks to. The murdered women are found countless times in dumps, often in the dumps of the maquiladoras themselves. Countless listings buttress this connection: “Emilia Mena Mena died in June. Her body was found in the illegal dump near Calle Yucateco, on the way to the Hermanos Corinto brick factory” (372); “In October the next victim was found at the new city dump, a festering heap a mile and a half long and half a mile wide in a gully south of the El Ojito ravine, off the Cases Negras highway, where a fleet of more than one hundred trucks came each day to drop their loads” (423); “The second death woman turned up next to a trash can in Colonia Estrella” (452); “The body was found at the entrance to the illegal dump El Chile” (464); “The second victim of the day, and the last of March, was found in a vacant lot west of Colonia Remedios Mayor and the illegal dump El Chile, and the south of General Sepúlveda industrial park (504); “The next month, in May, a dead woman was found in a dump between Colonia Las Flores and the General Sepúlveda industrial park. In the complex stood the buildings of four maquiladoras where household appliances were assembled. The electric towers that supplied power to the maquiladoras were new and painted silver” (358). These patterns map a clear connection between the disposability of the women conceptually to corporations/maquiladoras and the perpetrators of the feminicide: both conceive of women as “waste-in-the-making” (Wright 89). This is the logical extension of the

ideology.

As the descriptions of these violent deaths accumulate chillingly in “The Part About the Crimes,” no concession to narrative closure or finality is made by Bolaño, speaking to his wish to achieve an impossible poetics of death. Grant Farred describes this thinking as conciliatory to the fact that “Death can never be intelligible under the aegis of neoliberalism” (701), an idea that is in agreement with Deckard’s assertion that the deaths in “The Part About the Crimes” represent a neoliberal holocaust (367). Just as the book traces these systems of death and power as indicative of much larger culture tides, so too do they continue at the text’s end, unresolved by resolution or connection. Deckard describes this lack of resolution as mystery narrative that “fails to meet generic expectations: the revelation of the killers, the resuturing of the social body” (364).

Despite the refusal of Bolaño’s text to map finite connections between the violent deaths of these women, narratives are imposed by law enforcement repeatedly and myopically that the behaviors of these women were the cause of their death. This logic has troubling and strong ties to dominant attitudes about the deaths in Juárez in reality as well. Marcela Lagarde y de Los Rios clarifies,

The predominant trend depicts the crimes as a phenomenon, as an unusual, exceptional occurrence that only happens there and only in that way. Several hypotheses circulate, with great credibility, that tie the homicides of girls and women to other criminal activities and groups, such as the selection of the victims and the use of their damaged bodies as coded languages among powerful men, businessmen, or among criminals and their gangs.” (xiv)

The accusatory nature of these implications is clear: that somehow the socially

transgressive behavior of the murdered women was the cause of their death. Melissa Wright explains, "The police frequently explain how common it is for women to lead 'double lives' and ask the grieving and frightened family and friends to consider the possibility. By day she might appear the dutiful daughter, wife, mother, sister, and laborer, but by night she reveals her inner prostitute, slut, and barmaid. In other words, she might not be worth the worry" (75). Repeating allusions the police make in "The Part About the Crimes" mirror this logic of accusation and implied social transgression. The last woman found in the section found is described as,

...naked, but a pair of good-quality leather high heels were found in the bag, which led the police to think that she might be a whore. Some white thong panties were also found. Both this case and the previous case were closed after three days of generally halfhearted investigations." (Bolaño 633)

The language of disposability Wright gestures to is again reinforced by Bolaño's text. The message sent by the police is clear: "As we scrutinize the victims' sexual habits and sift through the skeletal clothing remains, we are supposed to wonder all the while, 'What was she doing there anyway?'" (77).

Another troubling narrative founded in cultural misogyny manifests itself in "The Part About the Crimes." In an attempt to rationalize these murders as the work of a foreign, charismatic serial killer, under the guise of the logic that "these murders are far too brutal for a Mexican hand and resemble events more common to the country's northern neighbor," essentialist, regressive ideas about gender are reinforced (Wright,

75)⁷. Such a character exists in “The Part About the Crimes” in Klaus Hass, “Blonde and very tall” (474), and very clearly a foreigner. These outlandish accusations again speak to the lack of accountability constantly associated with the deaths of these women. Klaus, a German with Nazi relatives, represents ties to the origins of these systems of power.

Through these connections, Bolaño teaches us the lesson that, as Tram Nguyen characterizes it, “horror is not contained or containable to one single period of history or one narrative; it bleeds, ranges over time and space, and mutates biologically, physically, and politically” (24).

The thread of victim blaming that this portion of the book touches on has strong ties to reality as well. Francisco Barrio, governor of the state of Chihuahua (home to Ciudad Juárez) from 1992-1998 helped to perpetuate this idea by speaking to the press about the “two lives theory” of the crimes against women, in which the authorities presumed the women would work in maquiladoras by day, but had ‘secret’ lives that they kept from their families in which they traveled in circles associated with drugs and prostitution (Portillo). Assistant Attorney General Jorge López corroborated these ideas by enforcing a curfew in the city, under the assumption that “all the good people should stay at home with their families” (Portillo).

The authorities too in 2666 emblemize this same heavy-handed misogyny, but as Tram Nguyen points out, this behavior is “easy to dismiss as the result of an ‘uncivilized’ nation, but it rings too deeply” (34). This again explicates how Bolaño’s

⁷ This correlates to the Mexican authority’s arrest of Egyptian national and US ex—pat, Sharif Sharif, who while living in Mexico was accused of being the ‘mastermind’ behind the crimes. When the murders continued while he was imprisoned, the authorities, including Spanish criminologist José Parra Molina, told the media that he was paying a gang called “The Rebels” to complete them for him (Portillo).

focus is always on ideology and larger social system as opposed to individual perpetrators. This much is revealed through the conflation of symbolic and physical violence in their attitudes towards the crimes. Corporeal violence (“In the other cells the policemen were raping the whores from La Riviera” [Bolaño 401]) is complemented by ideological violence (in the victim blaming, as well as the assumption that all of the women are prostitutes: “Practically a whore” [Bolaño 460]). Thus the reader can observe the interconnectivity of these symbiotic parts of ideology.

Though “The Part About the Crimes” is by far the largest section of the novel, each of the other four sections of the book represent a different part of the same conversation about how globalized systems of power participate in the cycle of gendered exploitation the maquiladoras represent. The first section of the book, titled “The Part about the Critics,” shows the potentially circulatory, vain, and unproductive nature of insular and removed academic discourse. A scene where the three scholars in the novel watch a scene of a Mexican street from their comfortable balcony at a luxurious hotel while drinking wine functions as a good microcosm of this dynamic, a point that Bolaño capitalizes on with biting irony when one of the scholars scornfully surveys the hotel’s not very Italian ‘Italian Garden,’ observing to himself, “sometimes people are staggeringly ignorant of what’s under their very noses” (48). Deckard also recognizes the critical implications of this black humor, arguing it is in this way that “the novel’s content self-consciously raises questions about the production of literary value within the subordination of culture to market laws and the corporatization of humanities scholarship” (372). Alberto Medina agrees, claiming that this marks a career-spanning trend for Bolaño, whose “narratives often consist of the denunciation of that other side of

the avant-garde, its institutionalization, its complicity with power and political repression” (550). Bolaño here is making satirical jabs at scholarship that remains in an ivory tower, and perhaps in particular the over-intellectualization of issues related to the feminicide in Ciudad Juárez. This satire speaks urgently to the ‘so-what’ of examining his text: what real-world implications can we learn by studying the ways these economies and modes of cultural production function? This is the true question at the heart of 2666. Its later discussion of the Holocaust too creates echoes we hear in Juárez: how do dominant systems of cultural and economic power perpetrate death on such a horrific scale?

Just as Bolaño’s text defies traditional categorizations of genre, authority, and narrative, in that very non-committal gesture is the implication that instead larger, more invisible and powerful concepts guide the futures (and deaths) of history. While “The Part About the Crimes” can be read as a clear call to feminist action, at the heart of 2666, the recurring patterns of these systems of violence and exploitation are shown to have cultural roots that are perhaps too deep to kill entirely. Perhaps Gloria Anzaldua comes close to conciliation in her diagnoses of the situation at *la frontera*:

At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes or perhaps we will decide to disengage from dominant culture, write it off altogether as a lost cause, and cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory. Or we might go another route. The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react. (101)

Conclusion

*The end of history is, alas, also the end of the dustbins of history. There are no longer any dustbins for disposing of old ideologies, old regimes, old values. Where are we going to throw Marxism, which actually invented the dustbins of history? (Yet there is some justice here since the very people who invented them have fallen in.) Conclusion: if there are no more dustbins of history, this is because History itself has become a dustbin. It has become its own dustbin, just as the planet itself is becoming its own dustbin" – Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End**

Questions of relevance began this thesis. I think it is fair and essential to be critical of the way we receive and understand literature, lest it become another ornamental object of ideology. To that end, let us consider this: far from being an incident only discussed in this specific part of the book, or indeed even to Mexico, the gendered patterns of violence Bolaño's text as a whole finds echoes throughout history. Context is not an accident in the novel. Indeed, the last portion of his book maps the life of Benno Von Archimboldi, an enigmatic writer, as he enters into adulthood at the outset of World War II in Germany, tracing connections to the war as the primal site of modern ideological reckoning and emergent morality. (We never see any examples of his writing, and the way he accomplishes his own cult of fame is a microcosm of the way we fetishize objects of academic fascination in itself). The connections in this section of the book, titled, appropriately, "The Part About Archimboldi," explore the holocaust as a potential site of the modern birth of the systems of death, power, and cultural fracture⁸.

⁸ It is also at the emergence of the Second World War that Rosa—Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano begin their exploration of the connections between feminicide and structured systems of power in their book *Terrorizing Women*, noting "the incidents of rape during armed conflicts are shocking, from German Nazi soldiers' raping of Jewish and Soviet women to the raping of Vietnamese women by U.S. soldiers and the sexual atrocities committed against women during civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone" (1).

Grant Farred connects this to Bolaño's central concern in the text, which he asserts is also the project of modernity-how do we articulate death? He writes, "The political effect of death does not, by any means, end with death" (690). This can be read as both the problematic of Bolaño's novel, and also as the thread that connects its seemingly disparate locations and events. The Holocaust teaches us this, just like the feminicide in Juárez teaches us this. Farred also argues this point in his article "Death, Neoliberalism, and the Postcolonial in Bolaño's 2666," writing "the Holocaust and the postcolonial," (if we can understand globalized, industrialized Mexico as a kind of postcolonial landscape) "have in common a 'legacy' with the following critical component: both are unthinkable without the elucidation of death" (692).

But why change place so frequently to do this? Tram Nguyen connects this to Derrida's ideas in *Specters of Marx*, noting, "Unmoored, the reader must come to terms with a traveling sovereignty that brings about her potential and necessary catastrophe, for 2666 maintains its sovereignty by deploying the dual logic of hospitality and by violently destabilizing the event of reading so that the reader is deposited on another bank, not knowing if she is arriving or leaving. This undecidability preternaturally conjures Derrida's deconstructive practice, but especially his late project to think the plight of the Other and "*sovereign without sovereignty*" (23).

Theodor Adorno's essay "Meditations on Metaphysics" speaks further to the strength of these ties. Commenting on the way the Holocaust culturally destroyed traditional notions of subjectivity, creating the kind of cultural and philosophical big bang that resulted in postmodernism, he writes,

...the destruction of nonidentity is ideologically lurking. Absolute negativity is in

plain sight and has ceased to surprise anyone. Fear used to be tied to the principium individuationis of self-preservation, and that principle, by its own consistency, abolishes itself. What the sadists in the camps foretold their victims, 'Tomorrow you'll be wiggling sky-ward as smoke from this chimney,' bespeaks the indifference of each individual life that is the direction of history. Even in his formal freedom, the individual is as fungible and replaceable as he will be under the liquidators' boots. (35)

Traditional ideas of narrative and subjectivity are further mocked by the creation of Archimboldi, himself an imagined writer, whose later renown is more the product of intellectual vanity of the critics in the first section of the book than it is by his own merit as an artist or great thinker. Indeed, the facile critics are obsessed with the mystery enshrouded in Archimboldi's work that by the end of the text is revealed to be little more than very silly and very arbitrary smoke and mirrors. By the last section of the text, Benno Von Archimboldi is exposed to be the nom de plume of Hans Reiter, a change that was only prompted by his past Nazi associations. Reiter himself knows he is not a great artist, but instead a cog in larger systems of death and power that he experienced first hand both in combat and as a prisoner of war during World War II. At the end of his life, he tells his son,

Play and delusion are the blindfold and spur of minor writers. Also: the promise of their future happiness. A forest that grows at a vertiginous rate, a forest that no one can fence in, not even the academies, in fact, the academies make sure it flourishes unhindered, as do boosters and universities (breeding grounds for the shameless) and government institutions and patrons and cultural associations and

declaimers of poetry – all aid the forest to grow and hide what must be hidden, all aid the forest to reproduce what must be reproduced, since the process is inevitable, though no one ever sees exactly what is being reproduced, what is being tamely mirrored back. (787)

Ideology is the secret and violence is its clues. It is not an accident of context that Reiter's revelations on the inherent falsehood of recurring systems of death, representation, and power comprise much of the last section of the text. These insights read like warning that predict the later violence in the fictional Santa Teresa and the real-life Ciudad Juárez. Reiter observes,

There's actually no such thing as a minor work. I mean: the author of the minor work isn't Mr. X or Mr. Y. Mr. X and Mr. Y do exist, there's no question about that, and they struggle and toil and publish newspapers and magazines and sometimes they even come out with a book that isn't unworthy of the paper it's printed on, but those books or articles, if you pay close attention, *are not written by them.* (785)

In this way, Archimboldi functions as a cultural writer just as Selena is one, and just as Bolaño is one too. If he can make any final claims to greatness, they are in the insight he offers here that ideology is animated by cultural, economic, and gendered factors outside of the understanding of even authorial understanding or control.

In this way, we can return again, and finally, to Foucault:

We should suspend the typical questions: how does a free subject penetrate the density of things and endow them with meaning; how does it accomplish its design by animating the rules of discourse from within? Rather, we should ask:

under what conditions and through what forms can an entity like the subject appear in the order of discourse. What position does it occupy; what functions does it exhibit; and what rules does it follow in each type of discourse? In short, the subject (and its substitutes) must be stripped of its creative role and analyzed as a complex and variable function of discourse. (137-138)

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